

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

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INTERVIEWER: SUSAN THOMSON; CHRISTOPH STROBEL; YINGCHAN ZHANG;
AND CRAIG THOMAS
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Tape 08.16

S: All right. So as we were saying, the purpose today is to have a conversation about what it was like for you growing up in the Highlands, and also living in Lowell in general, and also maybe a little bit about your family, why they first came to Lowell. So maybe we can start there. If you could just say a few

M: I know my mother and my aunt came from Canada. Then they worked here, and married, and had children.

S: Did they come to work in the mills here?

M: No. I don't, I think my grandfather was in shoes, in a shoe shop; and my grandmother didn't work.

S: And then, you were born here in Lowell?

M: I was born in Lowell, so were all my children. We all lived in the Highlands until I moved, to that place on Bower Street, there. I lived there thirty years.

C: Where did you live in the Highlands?

M: Where did I live? (C: Yes.) Well I lived not too far away from Cupples Square (C: Ok. I lived in that neighborhood too.). You did? With Page's Drug Store (C: Ok.) and Johnson's Bakery there.

C: Ok. And all those places are gone of course now.

M: Oh yes, from now if you go through there, you are going to think you are in Asia, because everything is in Asian, all the signs, everything.

C: Yes, a lot of Cambodians are living there now.

M: Well I don't really know, but I know they are Asian.

C: Was there more of a French-Canadian community there when you lived there?

M: No, that was little Canada. But in the Highlands there was a lot of Jewish people (C: Ok.) on the street I lived, and Irish. It was everything really; rich people moved up and up and poor people lived in the Lower; and middle class (C: Yes.) And then there was the Armory on Westford Street; they tore that down (C: Uh huh.). There was a depot on Middlesex Street; they tore that down. And they never should've because those were really old buildings that should have been in history. Broke my heart, I'll tell you. They tore down the church on Middlesex Street, the French church; then they moved it to Smith Street. Anything else? [S: laughs]

C: No, no, no, this is very interesting. We get a better feel for the neighborhood, how the neighborhood has changed.

S: What was your street address, where you lived in the Highlands?

M: Well, when I lived with my folks, I was on Gates Street (C: Ok.). Then I moved to South Loring Street; I lived there twenty years or more. So all my children were born in the Highlands, you know, in Lowell.

C: Ok.

T: Can I ask a question about Gates Street? I know that during the fifties and sixties many of the rabbis for the temples on Gates Street (M: Oh Yes.) Do you know any of them?

M: There was a large Jewish community because they have a synagogue up there. There was a lot of Jewish people in the Highlands, mostly in the higher Highlands. I lived in the lower Highlands.

S: And the church that you went to in the Highlands. (M: Yes.) What was the name of the church again?

M: Notre Dame De Lourdes, (S: Ok.) Our Lady of Lourdes. Now they built a little chapel in St. Margaret's Church named Our Lady of Lourdes; then they have a hall named after the Sacred Hearts Church that was also closed.

S: Did you go to that church for a long time?

M: Oh yes. When I was growing up, I went to the one on Middlesex Street until they tore that down and built the one on Smith Street.

S: And when you were living in the Highlands, you said there was a large Jewish population, and then the French-Canadians. Did people interact much together?

M: Well, there weren't that many French-Canadians. They mostly lived in Little Canada.

S: Ok.

C: Did you do a lot of your family shopping in Little Canada or did you mostly stay in the Highlands?

M: No, I went to school at St. Joseph High which was in the, right near the bridge. It's torn down.

S: Well, let's talk about your husband. (C: Yes.) You mentioned that you could tell everyone about him.

M: Yes. My husband was interviewed by, it was a professor, a professor that was at the college (C: Was it Mary Blewett?). Yes, it was. And he rebuilt the... (S: Yes, it's right here then. Henry, his name is Henry?) Yes. He rebuilt the loom in the museum. They tore it apart and then he put it together.

S: There's a nice article in here about him.

M: But they interviewed several people that worked in the mills and he was one of them.

M: Yes, well Walter Bayliss, he had that loom; he bought it. They took it apart, then my husband rebuilt it at the museum. There's a sign there with his name on it.

C: Did he work his way up in the mills?

M: Yes, he started at the lowest level and he became the loom fixer, and then he was a working Foreman.

S: So, did you think that the Highlands was a good place to raise your family?

M: Oh yes, when I lived there, it was a very nice place. But it's different now, I don't even want to go down that street any more because I see my house.

S: Did any of your children stay in the Highlands?

M: There's one, but, no, not any more. There was one that used to live in the Highlands, oh yes, I have one daughter, she lives right next to St. Margaret's Church and she moved from my house to that house. And you know, she had her family and I have 11 great grandchildren. (C: Wow congratulations!) And I was the only child. It's wonderful, it really is.

S: When you were living in the Highlands, did people mostly stay in the Highlands, you know, to do shopping and that sort of thing, I mean did you feel like it was a real neighborhood?

M: Oh it was a real neighborhood at that time. We were all friendly and helped each other out. You know, if you live twenty years with the same people...

S: The neighbors were about twenty years the same people?

M: Yes, it was very nice. I can't say about now. Oh my daughter lives at Harris Avenue and Shaw. Oh, they're building a new school there. Is that the Morey? (C: I think it's the Morey, yes.) Oh it's a mess up there right now.

M: It's going to take a while.

C: Did you guys go to any of the French-Canadian social clubs?

Y: Yes.

M: My husband did. No, I didn't.

C: Ok, so you were active in your church

M: My husband, he used to collect in church.

C: Ok.

S: And did you work outside the home?

M: No, I never. He wanted me to stay home take care of the children, their homework, all that sort of thing.

S: I guess that must have kept you really busy.

M: Oh yes because I have four children, three in three years and then one eight years later. A lot of women didn't work in those days. Today everybody works; you have to.

S: And did you do anything with your children to teach them about French-Canadian traditions or did you speak French

M: You know, at first we spoke French because my grandmother couldn't understand English; And after that, we started to use the English language. They can barely speak it now; it's too bad. I bet they lost it more or less. Because you know the other day in the Highlands there were not that many French people so you didn't talk French. Where my husband was, they all talked French all the time; she (referring to Rolande) talked a lot of French; she goes from one to the other without realizing it. (S: Yes. Laugh) That's kind of fun.

C: Did you talk French at church at all or, was it all also English?

M: No. At first it was all French; and then they changed of course. In the French church they don't speak French.

C: Uh huh.

S: So your neighbors, what ethnic background were they from?

M: I'd say there was Irish, Jewish, Portuguese. There were several you know, different nationalities. But everybody got along anyway.

S: And how long have you been here in Merrimack River Valley House?

M: I've been here three and a half years. But I lived in the elderly housing for twenty-eight years. (S: Before coming here?) Yes, because my husband went on disability, so we were one of the first people to move into there. Before that was built it was a ledge, I don't know if you remember that, you know the corner of Bowers and Fletcher. The land was a ledge, all bricks, they built the JC Place. That's where I lived for twenty-eight years.

S: And have you ever been to the National Park in Lowell?

M: Yes. I went on that ride on the boat, visited the mill. I'm going to go back some day.

S: What kind of things would you like to see at the National Park, what kind of exhibits do you like?

M: Well I'd be going to the mill to see all the things that my husband was involved in, mostly. That's all very interesting anyway, I got on that train downtown, the trolley. And then they took us for a boat ride up to the Vesper Country Club. So I've seen all of that. But the new one on Dutton Street, I didn't know anything about that.

C: Is that the American Textile Museum?

M: Yes, I haven't been there. Oh it's hard to get around, you know. And your children are busy; now my daughter retired, so I can ask her, yes. My daughter has been taking care of me since my husband passed away.

S: When did he pass away?

M: 1990. So she took, I took care of my mother for twenty years; she lived with me; so now my daughter is taking care of me.

S: So let's see, what else, hmm, about education. So all you kids went to the local school right in the Highlands?

M: Well, my children went to the French school, the Catholic school, and I went to the French school all my life even in high school; one of my daughters and my son, they both went; the other one went to Lowell High. But in their earlier years they went to the French schools.

C: Was there bilingual teaching going on at that time still or was it all English at that time?

M: Well, it was a lot of French. It shouldn't have been because they should have been teaching English more. You know, but no it was a lot of French. I still speak French with my children. [T laughs] They hack it. [S and T laugh] They can understand; they can make themselves understood; they are not really speaking that.

S: Rolande, did your kids speak French at all?

M: Oh Yes! Her?

R: Me? Do I speak French?

S: No, Richard, Rachel and Raymonde, did they speak French?

R: Oh yes, my three kids did speak French.

M: Yes, her son and her; they speak. Mine can speak French; but they don't.

R: We spoke French in the house.

S: Yes, so you spoke French mostly in the house?

R: And when they went to school, they spoke English.

M: We did that first. That's about it.

C: Today do your children still go to French-Canadian clubs or social clubs?

M: They don't go to any of that. That's passe with them.

S: Do you wish that they did or it doesn't matter?

M: No, it doesn't really matter because I never belonged to any; my husband belonged to everything.

S: And did they marry French-Canadians also, or...?

M: Two. One married a Greek girl; and the other one married Irish. And the two others married French. But in our day French married French, Irish married Irish. Today anything goes.

S: Anything goes; that's right. So was that hard for you that two of them married people that weren't French-Canadian?

M: No, no, because I knew my son's wife – they were brought up together, they had ten kids so, we had plenty of interaction.

S: So when they had their wedding, was it a mixture of Greek wedding and French-Canadian?

M: No, she got married in St. Margaret's; she turned Catholic. She had two children baptized in French, in St. Margaret's and one at a Greek church, which I couldn't understand. I said why not all of them at one church.

S: Maybe they compromised?

M: I have no idea. But I know she married in, and the two first ones were baptized in the St. Margaret's and then all of a sudden that the third one came and she said 'I want to go to the Greek.' Ok. But they don't believe in church anyway; so it doesn't really matter. Today, you know, it's altogether different. I could remember that all of the family used to go to the church together with the kids; now my children don't go to church except for one.

S: What about Raymonde and...? Did they

R: Well, my daughter married the son of George Legrande who was working for the city, the oldest one, she married the oldest one and my son married an Irish girl, Maguire.

M: Oh, that's really Irish.

S: Did they... (M: But I think that's a good thing.) did they go to church?

R: But Rachel, she was not married, when she died she was not married.

S: Did they go to church at all?

R: Hmm? Well they go to church; they go to church.

M: The only one that goes at my house, is Evelyn; and my son was an altar boy, he also went to the seminary for a short time and he came back and he, I don't know, girls were around here. So he decided he didn't want to go back. That's about it. I can't think of anything else.

S: Things change a lot.

M: They tore down everything I wanted to stay.

S: Did you have much voice when those things happened? Were there any neighborhood associations that tried to

M: Oh sure, but you know, the higher ups prevailed. Why they tore down that armory? Because that was a beautiful building. So was the depot. They should have been treasures of the city, but they didn't. I said they don't realize anything. And then they had the flood; that changed a lot too. You know, people moved out. It was flooded in 1938, that one.

S: What happened then? A lot of people had to move out...

M: Yes, they couldn't go back so they had to move to some place else.

S: Was there a lot of property damage?

M: Oh yes, a lot. It was awful.

T: Did people move out, did people move all the way out of Lowell, or did they sort of scatter in the nearby areas?

M: They scattered all over the place. Well, when you lose everything, you have to go somewhere, just like today when they have those catastrophes. It's awful. It was a very big flood. Somebody has movies about that; they came to show that one time. All the streets were full of water; all the neighborhood, oh it was awful! But we lived in the Highlands, so we weren't really touched by that at all; we were too high up.

C: Do you remember what impact the floods had, what neighborhoods were flooded, how far it reached?

M: Riverside Street and Emory Avenue; all in that section was all flooded. So they all had to, you know, get out of there, evacuate or whatever. I didn't feel the Depression either because my father worked for the railroad; he always had a good job. But that was tough too, for a lot of people. Ok, anything else?

C: How about you guys?

T: Hmm, I think that the Depression is an interesting question. (C: Yes.). What was your experience with that? Did, you know, was that something that Lowell really felt? You know, I grew up in Vermont (M: Oh yes, of course!) and everyone in Vermont said it never hit up there, so they never did well enough to have it be relevant, so

M: Then that was, when all of the mills left. You know, my husband he had to go out and find another job; my husband was like, fifty by then, it's hard to get a job then. United Elastic, that's where he was, fifteen years, twenty years at Market Mills.

C: When did his mill move? Was it in 1955 or was it later?

M: Yes, about that time. Then he went to the United Elastic and then that moved away to Hopedale, Mass, or some place, then he went to work for the Billerica House of Corrections. He went to school and became a stationary fireman. So that was a pretty good job.

C: And when did that happen? When did he retrain for that job?

M: I know he worked fifteen years there. When that moved out, he started to go to school, Peterson School in Boston to become a stationary fireman. And I get a lot of benefits from that (S: That's good.). I have a wonderful insurance that pays for everything (C: Oh that's good!) because he worked for like six years for the government. That was lucky. You know, a bad thing became a good thing (C: Yes.).

C: You mentioned very quickly and Craig asked about that too, in terms of the Great Depression, what was it like for you, you said your family was pretty very well protected (M: Oh Yes.) because your father worked for the railroad, but how was it for other people?

M: A lot of other people? Devastated, you know. They all lost their jobs. Where were they gonna go? He was lucky enough to get a job, you know. In the meantime, he used to work for the city of Lowell on the ashes and waste and picking up the trash. He liked it; he was outside all day. But he loved loom fixing. He liked to work in the mill.

S: (To Rolande) I think your husband also worked in the mill when you first came (R: Oh Yes, for Boott Mill.), right? And then he lost his job.

M: Oh Yes, that's

R: He went on strike as we get married; he went to the strike; when we came back, no job.

M: Oh that was terrible too.

C: When was the strike at the Boott Mill?

R: Hmm?

C: When was that strike at the Boott Mill?

R: Oh it was way back in 1940.

C: Ok.

M: Oh yes.

R: Yes.

C: Then you worked at Suffolk Knitting, right?

R: He was a loom fixer.

M: Yes, she said you worked

C: You worked at Suffolk Knitting too, right?

R: I worked at Suffolk Knitting, for twelve years. And then I changed and started to have babies; then I stayed home (M: Then you have to stay home.) and then I got a job sewing shirts at Hathaway, I went to Hathaway (M: They made shirts) so I went from one job to another. And then the last one was at Raytheon; that was the best one I had.

M: Oh you are not kidding! (R: Yes.) Although right, my daughter has been working there thirty years (R: It was fifteen years.) and I think she's gonna be terminated because she's, hmm, working on the payroll. They are gonna have that done on the outside (C: Uh huh.). They do that now; operations take it over. So there's quite a number of people that are gonna be laid off. Unless they offer her something, like they could offer her something, but it'd be out of town maybe. And I don't think she's going to do that. She might have to.

R: Yes. What did you do at Raytheon?

R: I soldered; I was on the bench.

M: She can do anything.

S: Yes, I remember it was an interesting story that you were one of the first group of women that were taught how to do soldering, wasn't it? They taught you?

R: I liked that job.

S: Yes.

M: She helped her husband build a wall

S: Yes, it's incredible, she does so many things!

M: Oh my god! Oh yes, she's very capable for ninety-four years of age. She can run circles around me. (T: laughs) Well I had an easy life before she had; she really did a lot. I stayed home and took care of the kids. But I'm not sorry for that. I have plenty of family.

R: Life goes on.

M: Yes, life goes on.

S: And, and when you first came to Lowell, you lived in Little Canada right round the corner, right?

R: No, I lived on Mount Washington Street (S: Mount Washington Street, right?) right there.

M: Oh a couple of streets down from there.

R: Yes. We lived there on the other side of the street, on Mount Washington. My aunt, we lived there.

T: Do you want to sit closer to the table so you guys can all talk better? Do you want, or

S: We can just move the table.

C: We are moving the microphone a little bit [Someone is moving the microphone] from there.

S: Yes, I bet it is ok.

M: That's the... (clanging sound) Steam heat. (C: Yes!) You don't have that, anymore.

C: Still, a lot of houses do in Lowell.

T: The house where I grew up in and where my parents still live in has steam heat.

M: Yes, but most of the places have... oil or gas.

C: Yes. This is a very

M: These things clang, you know.

C: Yes, and they bang.

M: When the heat is coming up. And the ladies don't like it, it keeps them awake at night. They say "Can you hear that?" (S: Laughs)

C: So, so you lived pretty close, just a couple of blocks away from here, right?

M: Yes.

R: Yes, yes.

C: And then you had a couple of jobs, hmm, did you have jobs in a couple of the mills as well?

R: Hathaway Shirts, that was a mill

M: Yes, but that was not a typical mill, more like a factory.

C: Ok.

R: Then I was working during the army, making gloves, so that if it would be cold... with wiring
(M: Insulator or whatever) So they wouldn't be cold in the army (C: Ok.)

C: Was that during World War Two?

R: That was at [unclear] (M: Yes.) They have a place downstairs and they started a business,
and I worked there, not too long I mean. And I went into upholstery. I did all kinds of job.

M: No kidding. She can do anything.

C: Yes, excellent.

T: Can I ask one more question? (S: Yes.) Do you remember anything about the strike with
your husband? Do you remember why they went on a strike?

R: Well, they went on strike (M: Wages.) everybody was going out on strike; all fight was
going out on strike. (M: And they wouldn't pay, you know.)

M: The union was wonderful (R: They moved away), but it turned back at the end. They had
too much power.

Y: For the wages or for the

R: They didn't have enough money and they were going out on strike. And the place moved
somewhere else.

Y: Did they work overtime?

R: Hmm?

Y: Did they work overtime?

R: Oh yes, they have overtime when they started working, but I mean...

Y: And they were not paid enough?

M: I think my husband made seventeen dollars a week, right? And then they went up to, twenty-
five. That was, rich.

R: That was at the time of Roosevelt (M: Yes, bread was nickel.) Yes, Roosevelt (M: so that's the difference.). And I was working at Suffolk Knitting, we were piece work and we were doing nothing. They were not paying enough. And then Roosevelt, the amount, fourteen dollars a week. (M: Oh that was terrible.) They had to pay fourteen dollars, so one of my sisters, she was not as fast as I was, and I was giving my pieces to her, so that they can keep her. And that's the way it goes. It was what it takes.

M: Well, I bought a house for 10 thousand dollars. (R: It was hard to make money.) And two years later I bought a car for 10 thousand dollars. You know what I mean? Now you know the price of houses. Oh I think I'd doubled the value when I sold it because it was a good time to be selling. That's when I moved to Bower Street.

S: I know when you came, I know when you just got married, your sister lived with you for a while?

R: Yes, two of my sisters lived with me when I get married.

S: And I think you mentioned your mother

M: My mother and my aunt. My aunt just became one hundred twelve.

S: So do you think that a lot of people that were living, had more extended families, like either sisters or

M: Oh yes, a lot of people do that. Well, you know, there were no nursing homes like today. You had to take care of your parents. My grandfather, grandmother lived in the 80s and 90s, so they had a son and a daughter that didn't marry that took care of them apparently.

R: People were taken care of at home. They would take care.

M: Today, they get sick? Nursing home. You know what I mean? It's not family-oriented like it used to be. You take care of your own.

R: It costs so much to live today that people have to go to have another job to make

M: Oh yes, to get by. Wife and husband both have to work. It's impossible to live on one salary. Of course you have two cars, the best TV, everything else. They want everything yesterday. Today I know my grandchildren, oh my god, they have the name brands for everything. They see it on TV. 'Oh I want this, oh the other kid has this, I want that too.'

R: And people weren't going to restaurants like they go today. (M: Oh my goodness!) Today they all go to the restaurants. Then we never go to the restaurants. We never went.

M: I went to three restaurants last Sunday and couldn't get into any of them; they were so packed.

S: So you always did your own cooking at home?

M: We stayed home. It was very rare that we went out and later we would just go for pizza. You couldn't take out the kids for a whole meal. You couldn't afford it in the first place. But gas was twenty-five cents a gallon. My husband had a Model A Ford. He could buy a dollars worth of gas and ride all week. [C laughs] Was true! It was a 4 cylinder.

R: Change, change, big change.

S: Yes!

M: But it's a better thing

S: So if you could think just like we were just talking about how things (M: changed) were different, have changed and all that, if you could think of what your dreams might be for the future, for your grandchildren

M: Oh I just hope that, it's going downhill right now, so I don't know. I care for my great grandchildren, I tell you, I don't know what kind of world they are gonna be brought up in.

S: What are the things that disturb you the most

M: Oh I hope they can go to college and get a good job some place. Kids today are lazy. Like my son had a paper route when he was twelve. They all play sports and you know that can be expensive. (S: Yes.) It's a whole different story today of everything. They demand this and that. Our kids were just content with whatever we gave them. A whole new generation. That's the last generation. I remember when she [Mary Blewett] came to the house, she interviewed us. I thought it was a riot. But we all got a book like that.

S: It's great. It's a wonderful thing to keep.

C: Yes.

M: So all my children have it too. It was a big thing in our life.

C: Yes.

M: He was an... elector, electoral college? (C: Yes) He was named as a Republican, sent to Boston for the electoral college, when Eisenhower was, you know, that was a big thing too. He went to the State House.

S: He must have been very active in politics in Lowell?

M: Well, the owner of Market Mills was in politics and he got him to be, you know, to be devoted to the party for labor. And once you do that, you become honorable. So then he used to sign his name with "honorable"... [T and S laughs] You know, we've still got stuff with his name

on it. He never had the education, but he got by. You know when you work in the mill, you know more than the guys that come in and do efficiency. They read a book; you do the work. And they can't run as smoothly as they think they can 'cause things come up then.

C: Things break.

M: Oh! My husband didn't like them guys, I tell you. He said, I could teach them! But that's how it was. Ok, I think that's all I got to say.

C: All right. Thank you so much to both of you.

S: Yes, thank you very much.

M: Oh that's ok. Glad to do it.